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ABSTRACT

This report offers a brief synopsis of findings from a comprehensive, 4-year study of charter schools. The study was designed to find out what types of students attend charter schools, how charter laws and policies affect charter schools in each state, the conditions under which charter schools improve or do not improve student achievement and other aspects of student learning, and how charter schools affect local and state systems of public education. The study, which began in 1995, gathered data through an annual telephone survey of all charter schools, intensive case studies of 90 charter schools and a smaller number of comparison schools, and interviews with staff at charter-granting agencies, state educational agencies, and school districts. The report lists research projects on charter-school accountability, charter schools and students with disabilities, charter-school finance, staffing, an evaluation of the national public charter-school program, and a study of growth in student achievement. The report also describes other research projects, such as project EARCH (Special Education as Requirements in Charter Schools), and offers overviews of demonstration and support programs, such as leadership training and the charter school teacher program. The document closes with a list of information sources on charter-school programs. (RJM)

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ED 434 396

RESEARCH TODAY

Charter Schools

A report from the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment

August 1999

ED-Sponsored Charter School Research and Demonstration Programs

Charter schools are public schools that have autonomy from selected state and local rules in exchange for accepting greater responsibility for student performance. As of July 1999, 36 states and the District of Columbia had adopted legislation enabling charter schools, and almost 1,100 charter schools were operating across the nation. Puerto Rico also authorizes charter schools under its more general community school law.

Interest in charter schools—where they are located, who they serve, what programs they offer, and how well they serve students—has been intense. In 1995, to help meet the need for information, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) began a program of national studies designed to answer these and other questions. The effort includes a National Study of Charter Schools, begun in 1995, a National Evaluation of the Federal Public Charter School Program (PCSP), which was launched in 1998, and a planned survey of all charter schools as a special component in ED's Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). ED also has sponsored three major studies of special issues affecting charter schools and has sponsored research through its grants programs.

The National Study has surveyed charter schools every spring from 1996 through 1999. The SASS survey is scheduled for the fall of 1999. The National Evaluation will conduct a survey in the year 2000. ED is coordinating this work to reduce the burden on the schools.

Recognizing the many issues that charter schools face as they initiate their programs, ED has also funded several demonstration projects. These projects support the development of model programs for public charter schools. Models include programs for outreach, collaboration, and leadership training. In addition, ED has sponsored programs offering fellowships for charter school teachers, and software development for administrative tasks.

RESEARCH

National Study of Charter Schools. The National Study of Charter Schools is a comprehensive, 4-year study of charter schools designed to examine what types of students attend charter schools, how charter laws and policies affect charter schools in each state, the conditions under which charter schools improve or do not improve student achievement and other aspects of student learning, and how charter schools affect local and state systems of public education. The study, which began in 1995, includes an annual telephone survey of all charter schools; intensive case studies of 90 charter schools and a smaller number of comparison schools; and interviews with staff at charter granting agencies, state educational agencies, and school districts.

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Research on Charter School Accountability. A key feature of charter schools is that they are held accountable for meeting the standards stated in their charter and for following performance procedures in student admissions. The 2-year study on charter school accountability, begun in 1997, will document ways charter schools and government agencies approach accountability, and trace the consequences of different accountability methods on the schools' ability to pursue coherent instructional programs and to serve families and children.

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Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities. Westat, Inc., in conjunction with SRI International, is conducting a study that will examine how charter schools are serving students with disabilities. They will examine, in part, the reason parents enroll students with disabilities in charter schools, the nature of services provided, and the outcome goals charter schools have for students with disabilities. The 2-year study, which was begun in 1997, includes site visits to 32 charter schools nationwide.

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Charter School Finance. The American Federation of Teachers, in conjunction with Policy Studies Associates, Inc., began a 2-year study of charter school finance in September 1998. The study aims to determine whether states' policies and practices for charter school finance help meet the policy goals set forth in their charter school legislation. Areas of study include charter schools' access to funding and other resources; whether finances are comparable to those available to other public schools; the spending patterns of charter schools; the level of financial independence granted to charter schools; the extent of financial oversight of charter schools; and the unforeseen costs of charter schools to states and sponsoring agencies.

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Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has, since the late 1980s, conducted a number of surveys designed to collect data on the characteristics of schools and school staff. The effort includes an integrated set of surveys that collect information on schools, their principals, and their teachers. SASS is a comprehensive national survey concerning the school work force and aspects of teacher supply and demand. It provides information on teacher qualifications, school programs and services, uses of academic performance assessments, parent involvement, class size, and many other topics that can be used to describe schooling. NCES plans to include a charter school component in the next administration of SASS scheduled for the fall of 1999. The data that results will provide information about charter granting agencies, school facilities, home-based learning, exemptions from state and district policies, and parent participation. In addition, it will facilitate comparisons of charter schools with other public schools. Following the 1999–2000 administration, SASS will be administered on a 4-year cycle, which will present an opportunity to study charter schools over time.

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Evaluation of the National Public Charter School Program. The evaluation of the federal charter schools program is a comprehensive examination of the impact of this grant program on the development and implementation of charter schools. The evaluation will examine how the program encourages the development of charter schools, including how state grantees and charter granting entities encourage the development of charter schools and how federally funded charter schools and school planners use their grants. It will identify the key characteristics of federally funded charter schools, staff, and students (including flexibility provisions, educational approaches, accountability structures, student achievement systems and measures), to the extent in which charter schools are targeted to specific populations, and whether charter school students are making progress on student performance and other measures. The contract was awarded in September 1998.

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Study of Growth in Student Achievement. Recognizing the importance of accountability for results, ED has awarded a contract to the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs to study how effective public schools measure growth in student achievement. The project will first develop criteria for effective school-level student assessment. Several nationally recognized assessment experts will help develop these criteria. The project next will ask for nominations from groups around the nation regarding schools whose assessment programs meet these criteria. Project staff and evaluation consultants will seek 30 outstanding public schools—15 charter schools and 15 other public schools— and gather information from them. The project will convene a conference of school, parent, community, and business organizations to discuss what can be learned from these schools. The results of the project will be shared via Internet, as well as through published material which will be widely disseminated to educator, state, family, business, and community groups.

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OTHER RESEARCH PROJECTS

In addition to research sponsored under the Charter School Grant Program, ED has sponsored a number of research projects through other programs.

Project SEARCH (Special Education as Requirements in Charter Schools). Project SEARCH is funded through the Office of Special Education Programs Field-Initiated Research Grants program. This is a 3-year qualitative study charged with investigating current special education policies and practices in charter schools. Based on its findings, the study will develop a set of policy recommendations to present for review and validation to a national policy meeting of federal, state, and district level general and special educators, parents, charter school representatives, and others. The study will be completed in March 2001. A more detailed description of Project SEARCH is available on the NASDSE Web site (***www.nasdse.org/project_search.htm***), where all project reports will be available. A report of the first project activity, a scan of policy issues in 15 states, is now available on the site in text and PDF formats.

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Study of Competing Strategies for Education Reform. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) is supporting a 3-year field-initiated study involving charter schools. This study, to be completed in the fall of 1999, assesses two competing strategies for educational reform in Michigan: Charter Schools and Professional Development Schools. Through comparative case studies of charter schools and professional development schools, the research team is examining the degree to which each strategy is successful in addressing and overcoming common obstacles to educational reform. These include the creation and sustenance of school communities, the establishment of standards and accountability for meeting them, and the development of strategies to "scale up" reforms from the individual school to the broader education system.

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DEMONSTRATION AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Cross Fertilization of Ideas and Practices (Project #1). SRI International and the National Education Association (NEA) are connecting charter Schools to their local context and encouraging collaboration that can improve public education and promote success at charter schools and other public schools. This project has identified and disseminated information about local strategies or models for developing regular and systematic communication among established and developing charter schools, schools engaged in other kinds of reform effort, and schools that are not yet engaged in reform plans. The project concludes its work in September 1999.

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Cross Fertilization of Ideas and Practices (Project #2). This project is developing a team of teachers and researchers from the City on a Hill Charter School and Boston Public Schools to promote collaboration between a public charter school and other public schools, and to investigate ways to prepare students in urban schools to study calculus. City on a Hill will conduct and document a series of teaching experiments in its school and in other Boston Public Schools. There will be a report on the team's experience in the classroom and in professional development activities.

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Project Connect. Project Connect is based on the belief that the charter school movement will not succeed unless it leads to improvement of public education in general. Toward that end, this project has endeavored to foster a collaborative environment through state and regional networks of charter and other public schools and educational stakeholders in the Southeast. Project Connect has developed and is assessing a multi-state, cross-fertilization network between charter and other public schools to enhance existing public education in the region (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina and South Carolina). The project concludes its work in September 1999. More information this project can be found at its Web site (***http://www.projectconnect.org***).

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Leadership Training (Program #1). **South Eastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE)** has worked on the design, implementation, and replication of a model leadership training program for charter and other public school leaders. Through retreat and remote learning experiences, the SERVE Leaders Institute has implemented procedures to help states that would like to develop more innovative leadership in public schools by enhancing the skills and talents of existing leaders and increasing the pool of leaders who are able to manage effectively in an innovative environment. The institute serves as a forum where regular public and charter school leaders learn from each other on various topics. Any one cohort of the Institute includes 3 regular public school leadership teams within the participating 10 schools. In an effort to leverage learning and foster partnerships, the institute has created a Peer Mentor program where the leaders from one cohort assist participants of the succeeding cohort. The project has an opportunity to extend its work beyond the current year.

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Leadership Training (Project #2). **Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)** will develop a leadership training program predicated on the belief that intensive instruction and assistance for charter school founders and leaders will contribute to the early success of the charter schools and allow them to focus on the actual instruction and teaching of students. The leadership training program will be based on the investigation of issues that new charter school founders face. NWREL will document their efforts and present this instruction to a variety of charter founders, leaders, and technical assistance providers to develop the model leadership training program on a national level.

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The Employer-Linked Charter School Project. Public Policy Associates (PPA) is exploring models to assist the development of employer-linked, career-oriented charter schools. It is collaborating with the National Alliance of Business (NAB) and Michigan Future, Inc. on outreach activities. The first phase of the project included creation of a national inventory of existing career-oriented charter programs and the conduct of case studies of selected schools. The second phase of the project focuses on outreach activities that will link the project's "Talent Bank" of experienced educators and employers to a learning network of school organizers and developers interested in starting similar programs. The project also offers site-based technical assistance on a limited basis. The hope is to stimulate the development of a significant number of new employer-linked charter schools in the next year. More on this project can be found at its Web site: (***http://www.nab.com/educationimprovement/charterschools/introduction/project***)

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Charter School Teacher Fellowship Program. This program allows 4-member teams of teachers from charter schools in the United States to spend 6 weeks of self-directed, independent study to focus on serious ideas that support the academic content of the curriculum. The grantee, the Council for Basic Education (CBE), awarded fellowships for four teams of charter school teachers in June 1998. The teachers in each team received stipends for six weeks of full-time summer study. In addition, each teacher's school received $500 for books and materials directly related to the teacher's research. The winning teams in 1998 were from Tempe Preparatory Academy (Tempe, Arizona), Community Involved Charter School (Lakewood, Colorado), Marblehead Community Charter Public School (Marblehead, Massachusetts), and The Howard Street Charter School (Salem, Oregon). The awards for 1999 are in review.

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Interactive CD-ROM Business Software ED has made two Phase I awards under the Small Business Innovative Research Contract program to support the development of plans to develop software that charter school administrators might use to resolve some of their administrative issues. Under these awards, MW Productions, Inc., has investigated the feasibility of developing a software package that can help guide new charter school developers through the business process of planning, designing, and implementing a charter school. Seward Learning Systems, Inc., has explored an electronic performance support system consisting of an integrated CD-ROM and interactive Web site to teach basic business processes, including budgeting, financing, fundraising, fund accounting, and managing the financial, legal, and human resource aspects of charter schools.

ED is currently contemplating awarding a Phase II Small Business Innovative Research Contract to one or more of these contractors to develop the software package that was under consideration during Phase I. The Phase II competition is in process, with an announcement planned for August 1999.

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WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION ON THE FEDERAL PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS GRANT PROGRAM?

For information on the Federal Public Charter Schools Grant program, write:

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
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Attn: John Fiegel

The U.S. Department of Education supports a Web site on charter schools. Operated by WestED, this site provides information, contacts and resources. The site contains profiles on over 400 charter schools as well as links to state and national resources. Research and technical assistance documents are available through the site. The site also manages and archives interactive discussion groups on key issues facing charter school organizers, chartering entities, and other education leaders. The site can be found at:
http://www.uscharterschools.org

PUBLICATIONS

Below are publications now in print and publications scheduled for distribution by summer of 1999. Many more publications will be available in late 1999 and the year 2000. Most publications can be found on the World Wide Web. Some of the Web addresses are included. You may also search for research reports and other information at these ED-maintained Web sites:

http://www.ed.gov/pubs/studies.html#Charter
or
http://www.uscharterschools.org

While supplies last, and unless otherwise indicated below, single copies of all publications can be ordered from:

Web site: ***http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html***
E-mail: edpubs@inet.ed.gov
Phone: 1-877-4ED-Pubs
Fax: 301-470-1244
Mail: ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398
Jessup, MD 20794-1398

Reports From the National Study of Charter Schools

RPP International and the University of Minnesota, *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report* (1997) (74pp).
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter

RPP International and the University of Minnesota, *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report Executive Summary* (1997) (7pp).
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter/execsum.html

Paul Berman, Beryl Nelson, John Ericson, Rebecca Perry and Debra Silverman, *A Study of Charter Schools: Second-Year Report* (1998) (154 pp).
http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter98

RPP International, *A National Study of Charter Schools: Executive Summary* (1998) (16 pp).

Paul Berman, Beryl Nelson, Rebecca Perry, Debra Silverman, Debra Solomon, and Nancy Kamprath, *The State of Charter Schools: Third-Year Report* (1999) (56 pp). (Note: this report has no executive summary.)

Rebecca Perry and Debra Silverman, with Paul Berman, Beryl Nelson, and Laura Bloomberg, *Teacher Retention and Charter School Sustainability* (forthcoming, summer 1999).

Wayne Jennings, Eric Premack, Andrew Adelman, and Debra Solomon, *A Comparison of Charter School Legislation: Thirty-Three States and the District of Columbia Incorporating Legislative Changes Through October, 1998* (forthcoming summer 1999, for Internet availability only).

The National Study of Charter Schools will also prepare a fourth-year report providing descriptive information. Other future reports will address school programs, state and district impact, and impact on students.

Reports From the Study of Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities

Thomas A. Fiore and Erin R. Cashman, *Review of Charter School Legislative Provisions Related to Students with Disabilities* (September 8, 1998) (44 pp). ***http://www.ed.gov/pubs/chartlegis***

Thomas A. Fiore et al., *Charter Schools and Students with Disabilities: Review of Existing Data* (1998) (33 pp). ***http://www.ed.gov/pubs/studies.html#Charter***

Reports From the Study of Charter School Accountability

Paul T. Hill, Lawrence C. Pierce, and Robin J. Lake, *How are Public Schools Held Accountable?* (forthcoming, summer 1999). This is a preview of the introduction to the topic, and will be published with a final report. Until then, it will be available on the Internet only.

Robin J. Lake and Marc Dean Millot, *Accountability for Charter Schools: A Comparative Assessment of Charter School Laws* (forthcoming, summer 1999).

Reports From Grants Programs

Education Commission of the States and the National Conference of State Legislatures, *The Charter School Roadmap* (September 1998) (69 pp). ***http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Roadmap***

Materials Available From the Demonstration Programs

Bryan Hassel, Gina Burkhardt, and Art Hood (SERVE), *Charter School Review Process: A Guide for Chartering Entities* (June, 1998) (67 pp).

Other Publications

Don Klein, Rose Owens-West, Jeff Cohen, and David Ogden, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, ED, *Accessing Federal Programs: A Guidebook for Charter School Operators and Developers* (March 1999) (61 pp).

National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum and Assessment, *Research Today: Charter Schools: A State Legislative Update* (December 1998) (4 pp).

ED is coordinating its survey work for all charter schools. There have been four surveys of all schools in the spring of 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 for the National Study of Charter Schools. Charter schools will be included in the national SASS survey of public and private schools for the 1999-2000 school year. In spring 2001, the PES evaluation will be in the field. Contractors are sharing data to reduce the burden on charter schools. We are extremely grateful to all those schools for the patient attention to these surveys. We expect the work from the surveys will help all those involved in shaping public charter schools in the future.

The statutory authorization for most of the ED charter school activity is in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title X, sec. 10305, as amended by the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), PL 103-382, sec. 101, 108 Stat. 3829 (October 20, 1994), and ESEA, Title XIV, sec. 14701, as amended by IASA, sec. 101, 108, Stat. 3908-3911 (October 20, 1994), as amended by PL 105-278, October 22, 1998. Other ED programs may also result in charter school research, through, for example, Field-Initiated Studies or the Research programs. Some OERI research labs and centers also prepare materials for and on charter schools.

Acknowledgments

Our appreciation to the many individuals who contributed to this report, and special appreciation is due to Michelle Johnson Armstrong who compiled and edited the material.

INSIDE:

- A new and revised list of ED's research and development programs for public charter schools
- Mailing addresses, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers for those involved in charter school research and development for charter schools
- An all-new list of ED publications and ordering information for and on charter schools

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